

PORTFOLIO REPORTS - STATE COUNCIL

COMMUNICATIONS REPORT

Sally Brindal – Portfolio Holder, March 2021

Communications motions raised at the 2020 ICPA (WA) State Conference sought to have ICPA (WA) support ICPA (Australia) in lobbying the Minister for Regional Development and telecommunication providers to investigate mobile call dropouts and restoration times on mobile tower back up batteries.

WA State Council raised this issue as a communications motion at Federal Conference 2020. A letter of support was also written to ICPA Federal Council for their work so far in this area. Other motions presented at Federal Conference related to:

- Universal broadband internet to Australia, including alternative satellite-based internet services and technologies, which would improve access to equitable education for all students in rural, regional and remote Australia
- A customer end technology roadmap for the transition from existing mobile phone configurations to country 5G due in 2024 by Telstra
- Rebates for rural and remote customers who will need to upgrade equipment (aerials and boosters) to change from 3G to 4G

The COVID-19 pandemic and the requirement for all students to be educated via an online platform certainly put the spotlight on communications and internet connectivity. As a result, planned improvements to services, product adjustments and accessibility were accelerated by all telcos.

NBN CO

Sky Muster Plus Enhancements:

From 1st April 2020 there were a number of Sky Muster Plus enhancements:

- Unmetered activities were significantly expanded to cover all online content and applications, with only two exclusions – video streaming (Netflix, YouTube, Tiktok, Foxtel, Stan) and VPN traffic – which continue to be metered. Unmetered examples include WhatsApp, Google Duo, Instagram Live, Viber, Microsoft Teams, WebEx, Zoom, Google Hangouts, Skype, Facebook Messenger, Facetime, Snapchat, GoToMeeting.
- The introduction of a new 25GB entry plan offering 25GB of peak data and 25GB off peak data, and the option of ‘top up’ data should customers exhaust their monthly metered data allowance.

Gaming and video streaming still contribute to data download allowances.

Standard Sky Muster:

From 1st April 2020 Sky Muster users also benefitted from improvements:

- Temporary access to an additional 45GB of download data for each standard Sky Muster plan for a period up to three months.

March 2020; NBN Co introduced a 40% additional wholesale Connectivity Virtual Circuit (CVC) capacity offer to support the nation's additional data demands as more people relied on their home broadband connections for work, study and entertainment. In September, NBN Co announced a further extension of its capacity offer at no extra cost to internet retailers until 30 November 2020. NBN Co also extended its offer to increase the fair use thresholds for its standard Sky™ Muster satellite service to 90GB* of wholesale download data also until 30 November.

If you are having difficulties with your Sky Muster connection, there are a number of trouble-shooting measures that can be done prior to contacting your Retail Satellite Providers (RSPs):

- **Turn off** ALL devices. If you have a nbn Sky Muster connection unscrew the white cable from the SAT port that goes from the wall into the nbn box (NTD).
- Wait at least **5 minutes**.
- Turn the **Devices on in order**
 - Screw in the white cable, then turn on the **NBN box first** (also known as the NTD or modem). Wait until all the lights are on and indicate an active connection (this may take a few minutes). Active connection for NBN Sky Muster is a blue light.
 - Then turn on your router. Wait until all the lights are on the router indicate an active connection.
 - Then turn on all your other devices.

If you are finding that your connection, no matter what the type, is not performing as it should, or your plan does not meet your needs, you need to contact your provider. More trouble shooting tips can be found on the BIRRR website using the following links:

<https://birraus.com/2016/10/22/skymuster-not-working/>

or

<https://birraus.com/nbn/nbn-fixed-line/>

or

<https://birraus.com/2016/05/10/troubleshooting-your-fixed-wireless-internet-connection/>

depending on your type of connection.

The BIRRR (Better Internet for Rural, Regional and Remote Australia) website www.birraus.com has a wealth of information on the whole range of internet options, various providers, trouble-shooting tips and COVID-19 updates. The following link will take you to their Sky Muster/Sky Muster Plus plan comparison and further information. <https://birraus.com/2018/11/12/skymusterfaq/>.

Sky Muster Installs:

- Currently there is no cost to have the hardware required for a Sky Muster NBN internet service installed at your place.
- This government funded incentive was originally only guaranteed until 2020 but is still continuing. ICPA (Australia) urges members to take advantage of this while they can. Information on providers and plans can be found here. <https://birraus.com/satellite/satellite-providers/>.

NBN help to connect low-income families with home-schooling needs:

To help Australians respond to the COVID-19 pandemic nbn provided up to \$50 million to assist phone and internet providers to support low-income family households with school aged children who do not currently have an active nbn connection at home. Participating nbn Sky Muster providers who

were ready to connect customers on a 5GB/5GB Peak/Off Peak Sky Muster Plus Plan for \$0 for 3 months were:

- Activ8me
- IPSTAR Broadband
- SkyMesh
- Southern Phone

NBN Co later:

- Extended its Education Assistance offer for unconnected low-income households with online schooling needs until 15 January 2021; and
- Has broadened the 'Illuminate' (First Timers') wholesale discounts for premises that have not yet connected to the nbn network and have passed 18 months since their premises were able to connect or have disconnected after having an active service and have been inactive for more than 6 months.

100 Free Laptops:

NBN distributed 100 recycled laptops to schools with students in need in rural and remote schools. ICPA (Aust) took part in the discussions to assist with identifying schools in our states and NBN worked with ICPA (Aust) to understand how best to distribute the 100 nationally. All laptops have been allocated and delivered. NBN asked that the schools provide some indication of impact/feedback on how the laptops were being used by the students who have received them, e.g., some good news stories, but this feedback process is fairly open and simple.

NBN Co/ACCAN Local Round Table:

In May I participated in a virtual round table discussion hosted by Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) in partnership with NBN Co. ACCAN is the peak body that represents all consumers on communication issues including telecommunications, broadband and emerging new services.

The 33 participants involved in the round table discussion represented a broad cross section of community groups, across all of WA, who work with disabled, vulnerable, at risk or isolated people.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic millions of Australians have increasingly relied on their phone and home broadband services. Unfortunately, some Australians are at risk of being left behind because they are unable to afford a home broadband service. ACCAN is aware of this plight and wants 'No Australian Left Offline: affordable broadband for Regional, Rural and Remote Australian and All Australians'.

During the roundtable NBN Co looked at how it can work to lift digital capability, gave a progress update of the NBN rollout in WA and the key priorities for 2020 - including assisting our vulnerable communities.

It was important to understand what digital capability means, explore what lifting digital capability would look like and what benefits connectivity would provide to the most vulnerable members of community.

NBN LOCAL

Regional Business Unit:

October 2019 nbn announced it would be creating a new business unit that was committed to better serving and engaging with regional communities. The Regional Business Unit is to take control of fixed wireless and satellite networks as well as expanding community and stakeholder capability to ensure customer expectations are understood. Naomi Evans was appointed the Head of Regional and Community Affairs (WA) for nbn Local in July 2020 and in the months since has been building a team that will live and work in the regions.

If anyone has any regional issues, concerns or opportunities please feel free to email her.

Testimonials:

NBN is seeking testimonials from members who are using a Sky Muster Plus connection for tertiary studies. If you know of anyone and you think they may be prepared to discuss their experience, please either pass my contact details on to them, or give me theirs with their permission.

Scam Warning:

Just a reminder - Members are advised that there are still scams occurring in relation to nbn. Customers are contacted by someone claiming to be from nbn asking for personal information and/or a threat to services being cut.

TELSTRA

Telstra made improvements to their plans and services for their customers as a result of COVID-19, offering:

- Unlimited data for home and small business broadband customers (ADSL, NBN, Cable) until 30 June 2020.
- Mobile Broadband plans received an additional 10GB data allowance on the small and medium plans increasing their data allowance to 20GB and 60GB respectively, and the large plan doubled to 200GB of data allowance.
- 25GB extra data to use in Australia, available for 30 days, for post-paid personal and small business mobile customers. Customers could apply for the extra data via the Telstra 24x7 and My Telstra Apps until 30 June 2020.
- 10GB extra data available for 28 to 30 days (depending on your plan) for the \$40+ pre-paid customers.
- Unlimited standard calls within Australia for eligible pensioner customers on landlines between 19 March – 30 April 2020.
- Switching on SMS over Wi-Fi on the mobile network.

Bridging the Divide:

From their Australian Digital Inclusion Index research, Telstra are aware that not all families can afford or have access to digital technology which meant their children's learning had the potential to be severely impacted if they could not attend school during the COVID-19 pandemic. To help bridge this divide Telstra provided 30,000 internet-enabled sims at no cost to state and territory education departments and Catholic Education to distribute to families in their states who were most at risk of not being able to access online learning. Telstra also worked with education departments to provide

additional student and teacher devices, equipment, connectivity and digital platforms, such as Cisco Web-Ex or Microsoft Teams to enable virtual classrooms.

Mobile Black Spot Program (MBSP):

Under Round 5 of the MBSP regional Australia will benefit from 182 new mobile small cell base stations with 27 in WA.

- Across all rounds of the MBSP program more than 740 sites are completed nationally.
- Completed more than 200 small cells for remote communities (at Telstra's expense).
- 200 additional sites are yet to be delivered, mostly from Round 5 of the program.

4G Update:

Telstra are making sure regional Australia benefits from breakthrough technology – like the innovation that [doubles the coverage range](#) of 4G towers in some locations – along with connectivity-enhancing products like the [Telstra Go Repeater](#). Telstra is on track to ensuring their regional customers have access to fast 4G well in advance of the 3G Network closure in 2024. Plus, the benefits of their [Narrow Band Internet of Things Network](#) – at nearly 4 million km² it is by far the largest in the country.

5G Rollout:

- Telstra's 5G reaches more than 40% of the population and will expand to 75% of the Australian population by the end of June 2021.
- More than 1,400 suburbs have 50% or greater coverage.
- There are more than 60 cities and towns across the country where Telstra's 5G rollout is now underway.
- Telstra has switched on more than 2,000 5G sites nationally.

Telstra WA Regional Advisory Council (RAC):

As President of ICPA (WA) I was invited to be a part of the Telstra WA Regional Advisory Council. The RAC was established in 2017. The purpose of the RAC is for Telstra to work together with 13 external key regional stakeholders from leading industry and community groups, who are invited to the Council by Telstra, to identify, and where appropriate, address the telecommunication challenges and opportunities facing rural, regional and remote Australians and their communities.

The WA RAC meet up two to three times a year. At the May meeting the discussion focused on the experiences of the various groups in accessing mobile technology and any barriers that exist.

Telstra also heard great feedback including - new towers are making a difference to the local communities, skilling up and training of digital mentors to help regional people, and new and innovative ways to deliver education and digitally upskill teachers.

MMS Services:

Earlier this year Telstra enabled SMS services to be used over Wi-Fi calling. By the end of September, MMS messages had the capability to be used over Wi-Fi calling. The way to ensure your handset can do this is to install any phone updates as they come through. Some older handsets and devices will not be able to use this facility. iPhone 6 and below and android equivalents are included in this list.

NGWL:

Telstra advised that they were withdrawing their Next Gen Wireless Link (NGWL) fax services from 10 November 2020. Where Telstra supplied a NGWL service to fulfil their USO voice obligation, the

NGWL fax service had been offered as an additional service for an extra \$1 per month. NGWL voice services will not be impacted. There were over 2000 customers with the NGWL fax service, most of which are regional, and half are businesses. Around 600 customers had used it between July and October.

Federal Council welcomed feedback on this, to ascertain whether Telstra's decision was going to be problematic for users of the service, and gauge whether they have easy access to other replacement options like scanning and emailing.

Unmetering of Education Sites:

Telstra has contacted ICPA regarding sites and applications that are used for education that they may look at unmetering on their network. Federal requested States to get a list together of what they think their "top 10" sites/applications would be. In 2015 Telstra did commit to unmetering some sites, and we have asked them to revisit this and see if it needs changing/updating.

Please see the list here for each of the sites in our States.

https://www.icpa.com.au/module/latestNews/item_attachment/16/download-icpa-telstra-unmetered-site-list-2016-02-24.pdf

BIRRR:

A survey was sent out to members to help both BIRRR and ICPA gather information to assist with their lobbying. It was an independent survey designed to help nbn Sky Muster users choose a good provider. It was open to people with active nbn Sky Muster connections.

Alternative Voice Service Trials:

The WA Government is undertaking Alternative Voice Service Trials. More information can be found here: <https://www.communications.gov.au/what-we-do/phone/phone-services/universal-service-guarantee-telecommunications/alternative-voice-services-trials-program#:~:text=The%20Alternative%20Voice%20Services%20Trials,fixed%20wireless%20and%20satellite%20footprints.>

Regional Advisory Network:

The new Regional Advisory Network has recently been launched by Telstra.

"The RAN program has been designed to help customers who are having connectivity issues in their home, business premises or on the road. We want to be able to fix these problems the way that our regional customers need: by putting the right people on the job who understand the issue in detail and who can recommend a solution". - Telstra

More information can be found by following this link.

<https://exchange.telstra.com.au/helping-our-regional-and-rural-customers/>

Schedule a Regional Network Advisor (RNA) visit:

- The aim of the RNA team is to provide an Australia wide team of regional and rural based Telstra advisors, who can work with customers in their local area on mobile issues.
- This team consists of 5 RNAs and approximately 60 Local Communications Advisors (LCA's).
- RNAs are predominately wireless access skilled and are based in regional Queensland, Northern NSW, Victoria / Southern NSW, Southern WA and the Northern Territory.

- LCAs are located across Australia who provide customer service to rural and regional customers.
- Telstra have received positive feedback from customers and stakeholders from the expansion of this team.

STAND (Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters):

Improving telco network resilience;

STAND sites

- Federal Government funded \$37.1m package was announced on 17 May 2020 and includes four key elements:
 - \$18m for improving the resilience of base stations by providing longer lasting backup power sources in the event mains power is disrupted.
 - \$10m for portable communications facilities such as Telstra's Cell on Wheels to allow faster restoration of service in the event infrastructure is damaged by a natural disaster.
 - \$2.1 to improve information provided about access to telecommunications in an emergency.
 - \$7m to deploy ~2000 NBN satellite services to rural fire authorities and evacuation centres.
- Telstra are actively supporting this program and have put in bids for the Temporary Telecommunications Infrastructure Deployment and Mobile Network Hardening Grant opportunities.

ICPA (Aust) Federal Communications Portfolio:

Transportable connectivity - transportable connectivity solutions for itinerant geographically isolated students, for example, droving camps, mustering contractors and the like. Typically, these families move regularly to live at current workplaces and do not have a building (or such) to establish a Sky Muster connection. ICPA (Aust) is currently working closely with government and other key stakeholders to see what could be done to help these families. If you know of any families that would be in this position, could you please ask them if you could pass their details? It would be great to get some idea of the number of families and their individual scenarios in this position.

Regional Tub Hub - is now up and running. ICPA (Aust) sits on The Regional Tech Hub - Stakeholder Reference Group, which meets regularly to discuss how the Hub can help our members in the best way it possibly can. Go to <https://regionaltechhub.org.au/> or call their hotline on 1300 081 029 for Independent, free advice about telecommunications services for regional, rural, and remote Australians. Please let them know how your experience or your member's experiences go, so ICPA (Aust) can pass feedback on their performance to The Ministers and department.